



In the fall of 2006, Gwynn Turnbull Weaver and David Weaver began drawing up the shot list for what would become a series of DVDs determined to record the stock handling techniques of the Great Basin/Old California regions. Instructional in nature, the DVD's soon became more than just a "how to" guide. Filmed on many of the area's historic ranches, the footage includes beautiful images of the buckaroo life against the haunting backdrop of the "land of the big outfits." The following excerpt from a journal entry from the filming process gives a glimpse of life on the production trail in the making of this noteworthy DVD series. The first one in the series focuses on the mechanics and philosophy of branding calves "rodear style" and is scheduled to be released in November, 2008.

Through The Lens

A glimpse of life on The Californios DVD series production trail.

by Gwynn Turnbull Weaver

By 4:30 PM my shoulder is aching, and the skin on my face is stinging from 10 hours of wind mixed with high desert sand. The view is different from the ground, crouched behind a camera, struggling to steady its 18 lbs. of high tech digital, state of the art capabilities.

Stabilizing devices are worthless in a branding trap—continually moving, shuffling for different angles, dodging ropes and colts and buckaroos that are more focused on their roping than the camera toting earthling stealing a shot between the clouds of dust. I thrust the camera back onto my reddened shoulder again and squint into the viewfinder.

This day is hot, the humidity nonexistent, and water is a long walk away. I'm huddled next to a clump of sage, tucked in tight to the fence, hoping the high horned desert cow staring me down will turn and drift back into the rodear.

We began filming the first of what is to be a trilogy of stockmanship DVDs back in February of 2007. That winter, sitting in my living room drinking coffee, the idea sounded good: put together a series of DVDs that feature the Great Basin/Old California stockmanship practices. We wanted it to be the real thing, shot at "live" brandings, showcasing generations of experience and knowledge, neatly packaged into a documentary format/instructional piece dedicated to the unique mixture of art and commerce that is the hallmark of this noble region's stock handling practices.

Thirty-two days of filming over 16 months, 22 locations and more than 150 camera set-ups later, I feel as though I'm at the end of my rope. I knew better. I'd spent 6 years working in L.A. in the film industry, traveling the U.S., going from one feature film location to another. I knew what went into the making of a quality production. I just chose to ignore it and blunder headlong into my current predicament. I've been learning to run the expensive equipment "on the fly," making mistakes and rallying day by day. I am anxiously aware of time, standing on the sidelines, recording life instead of living it, hoping that it will be worth it.

I feel my camera operating skills slowly improving, and with it, my



own roping abilities are beginning to decline. As the hours and the calves roll away, I question the value of the project.

I can sense the wheel of time pulling these practices back into the mainstream. They were always ecologically and environmentally friendly, humane and efficient, and finally after years of the barbaric industrial era's "assembly line" stock handling methods, they are seeing a revival economically.

Cattle can be handled in smaller bunches, worked rodear style without the need for expensive corral construction, and most importantly, they can be kept scattered out, lessening their impact on soils and vegetation. Rodear grounds can be moved and changed easily, and the livestock can be handled out where they need to graze, reducing the long, trailing gathers to distant corrals, shrinking off pounds and stressing small calves. We believe the "old ways," with a little tweaking, can be the "new found" efficient stock handling practices for an entire generation of stockmen raised in the "speed roping" era, oblivious to the existence of such a business model. We felt all we needed to do was preserve it a few years more, before it was completely gone, so that it would be there for savvy folks to rediscover.

At a quick break for lunch, I lean against the tailgate of the branding pickup, reviewing the long list of camera angles and details that still need recorded. In a moment, I am overwhelmed, and fight back the urge to throw the camera into the sagebrush and go back to the silent, anonymous life I led before. I pause to remind myself that many of my most noteworthy experiences had begun in ignorance. Had I known what was involved before I began, I would never have begun. And, of course, once completed, those were the experiences that ended up being the greatest memories of my life.

I take a deep breath and search for the resolve it is going to take to heave the camera back onto my shoulder and carry on. I struggle to focus on breaking down the list into small manageable bites and try to come up with a plan to execute them.

The branding commences again. I walk past the crew as they remount their horses, they are tired but still full of the life that pulls them back to the job—that one great loop, that one great horse, that one great day always just around the corner ahead of them. I am envious. I trudge back to my self-appointed huddle and take up my station, grumbling and resentful.

And then, of course, it happens, the way it always does, and yet strangely always catches me by surprise. Lining up on a shot of colorful desert cows and calves rolling out and around, Dave sits atop a loud colored paint gelding, swinging confidently on the rodear's edge as the wind picks



up. I lean into the fence to steady myself, eye and camera still riveted to the action. The wind increases, dust rolling up from the ground, picking up sticks and debris. I bear down, ignoring it, determined to shoot thru the dust, as I have so many times before, and see what comes of it. Suddenly the scene is completely obliterated in a solid boiling cloud of alkali, everything disappearing for a moment. I grip the camera, the record light still blinking in the viewfinder. Damn this wind. In an instant the lens is clear and standing before it, three stories high, a towering cone shaped dust devil sweeps across the trap and meets the cows head on. They disappear behind it, then in an effort of sheer will, large eyes clenched shut, they emerge thru the heart of it, pushing through the choking curtain and onto the clear desert stage. Instinctively I know I have just captured something divine.

I feel something swelling up inside my chest. I know that it is coming from that mysterious force that sends down the messages that what we are doing is good, that it is coming from the right place and that it needs doing. The message that says "this is bigger than your sore shoulder and your lost loops and your sun withered ego. It is more than a product or a technique." It is the last sputtering beam of light shooting forward through time from a star long dead and gone.

I lower the camera onto my knee and stare silently at the place where the swirl finally dissipated into the bone bleaching dryness, my eyes powdered with dust. I drag my sleeve across my tear-streaked face. In that moment I know that this little circle of dirt I crouch in, the pungent, twisted sage at my back, this is exactly where I am supposed to be in this reverent moment in time. And I am suddenly humbly thankful for the opportunity to record it.